

## A True Story of Hope About the Basic Goodness of People

Gander, on the island of Newfoundland, Canada, was a small, quiet, relatively unknown town of ten thousand inhabitants far away from the urban centers of a hectic world, at least until September 11, 2001. That day, following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the United States closed its airspace to incoming planes. Those destined for one of its airports were diverted elsewhere. Thirty-eight planes, carrying almost seven thousand passengers of ninety-seven different nationalities, were forced to land at Gander International Airport. A major humanitarian challenge had suddenly been thrust on the people of the town. The story of how they responded has since become the subject of several books, and more recently a musical, *Come From Away*. [Come From Away](#) | [About the Show](#) | [Official Site](#)



The passengers were exhausted, disoriented, and shocked. Some had been on board planes for 28 hours while extensive security checks were made on their luggage. Many of them had no idea of where they were, or how to get in touch with relatives and friends to let them know they were safe. Yet almost immediately, they encountered an unusual sense of welcome. Greeting them was a feast prepared by the people of the town. Local bus drivers, who had been on strike, immediately set their grievances aside to take the newcomers to the various shelters that had been prepared for them around the town, in schools, Salvation Army centers, and churches.

People invited them into their homes so they could shower and refresh themselves. They provided them with linen and toiletries. Local fast food outlets supplied them with chicken and pizza and sandwiches. Children were given toys. Those celebrating a birthday were given a party and presents. For those who did not know where they were, a volunteer taped a map of the world on the wall of one of the shelters, with a big red arrow pointing to Gander and saying, "You are here."

Newrel, the Newfoundland telephone company, set up in front of its offices, a bank of phones so people could get in touch with relatives, free of charge. A local cable television provider set up screens in all of the refuge centers so that passengers could follow the news as it emerged. A center was set up in one of the schools, providing access to emails and computers and television so that passengers could maintain contact with their families and the world outside. When townspeople in their cars saw any of the "plane people" in the street, they would stop and offer them a ride to wherever they were headed. Throughout their stay, which for some lasted almost a week, the passengers were given not just food and shelter, but psychological support and human warmth.

As the author of one of the books put it,

*For the better part of a week, nearly every man, woman, and child in Gander and the surrounding smaller towns, stopped what they were doing so they could help. They placed their lives on hold for a group of*

*strangers and asked for nothing in return. They affirmed the basic goodness of man at a time when it was easy to doubt such humanity existed. (The Day the World Came to Town, by Jim DeFede)*

It would be easy...to be pessimistic about the future of Western...democracies...What the story of the people of Gander tells us...is that pessimism is premature. It is not that we require a special effort to be moral. It is, in many respects, our default mode. We are made to compete, but we are also and equally made to cooperate. We need one another. We care about one another.

*This story is taken from Pages 295-7 of a book titled **Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times** by Jonathan Sacks*